

MILDRED GARCÍA

Democracy, Diversity,

FEATURED TOPIC

We must never compromise our commitment to social justice and equality in order to protect our salaries and our positions

OUR FOUNDING FATHERS viewed their arrival in this country as an opportunity for freedom. I remember learning in elementary school the words of the Declaration of Independence: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” We were taught to be proud to be Americans. Every

morning, we recited the Pledge of Allegiance and, in chorus, we repeated “one nation, under God, with liberty and justice for all.” As a child, I believed all of this.

Our founding fathers wanted freedom, liberty, and social justice for those who came, yet they did not recognize that that freedom came at the expense of those who were here before them and those arriving who were different from them. I had my first inkling that I was different when, in the first grade, my accent was deemed to be unacceptable, and I was placed in an accent reduction class.

My generation lived through the assassinations of President Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr., and Bobby Kennedy—individuals who spoke about equality for all, regardless of skin color. The upheaval of the time was electrifying. Growing up in the late 1960s and 1970s, I learned about inequality and slavery, about how the poor were treated, and about the role played by skin color in dividing the

haves from the have-nots. The inhumane and barbaric treatment of human beings—men and women owned, beaten, and even hanged because of the color of their skin—was incomprehensible to me. I also learned about separate and unequal schools and how privileged whites received a better education.

Much later in my educational journey, I learned that Columbus did not “discover” America but, rather, that he arrived in America. I learned that the natives were conquered, killed, and displaced from lands they cherished. While in college, I was amazed to learn that, during World War II, 120,000 Americans of Japanese descent—American citizens who had nothing to do with the bombing of Pearl Harbor—were rounded up like cattle and interned in camps. From the very beginning, the United States has not lived up to the ideals of freedom, liberty, and social justice.

Where are we now?

Today, people of color occupy positions of authority; they are represented in the boardroom and the classroom, in the professions and in government. Both Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice have served as secretary of state. And indeed, this is a historical moment: an African American, a woman, and a Latino are seeking the Democratic presidential nomination.

Yet, while some progress has been made, we still have a long way to go. Our schools are failing our children; in many of our major cities, black and Latino children are dropping out at the rate of 50 percent and higher. Many men of color are not finishing high school, and those who do finish are not enrolling in college. There remains a persistent gap between the college graduation rates for black and Latino students and the rates for white students. The percentage of college faculty and administrators of color remains small.

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& Presidential Leadership



Following the attacks of September 11, 2001, the government did not set up internment camps for Americans of Middle Eastern descent. But because many equate “terrorist” with “Middle Eastern,” racial profiling has become an accepted practice. Racial profiling is also practiced in our Latino communities, where people who look in some way like illegal immigrants are rounded up by the police.

Today, we are involved in a war based on lies: Where are the weapons of mass destruction? Where is the evidence of a link between Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein? And which Americans are fighting the war in Iraq? For the most part, it is men and women of color and it is the poor.

Finally, Hurricane Katrina affected the lives of so many people of color and exposed the

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deep inequities in this country. We know that the Ninth Ward of New Orleans has been ignored and that the promises made by our government have not been kept. The lack of political will, bureaucratic bungling, and poor policy decisions have left the region's poor further behind than ever.

How far have we really come?

In terms of diversity, how far have our college campuses come? The Duke University lacrosse case has been much in the news lately. Different perceptions abound; the case is rife with racial tension. At a recent board of trustees retreat, I discussed the case over dinner with two board members. Later, as I was collecting my luggage at the airport, one of them approached me with a written statement of his perceptions of what had happened at Duke. In his view, the case presents an example of democracy gone awry. A politician, looking to win an election, had jumped on the sensationalistic "majority view" bandwagon. The university president had reacted similarly, firing a renowned lacrosse coach and ruining the college careers of gifted

young men who chose Duke, among other reasons, for the quality of its lacrosse program. How often, he asked, do college presidents play politics by reacting to a vocal majority and by quashing intelligent discussion before all the facts are known? Let us be open-minded, he urged; let us be as open to the views and needs of the silent minorities on our campuses as we are to those of the vocal majorities.

The Duke case, and the different perceptions of it, raises important questions about the role of the college president in fostering democracy, diversity, and social justice. For me, it highlights the fact that, as president, I must model the behavior I seek to promote on campus. I call it "modeling constructive difficult dialogues." That board member and I will get together at the next board meeting, for example, and we will discuss the Duke case. I will tell him that I read his views and that my own views are different. I will ask him to consider the behavior of the lacrosse team members. It appears that there had been excessive drinking. Is that something we condone? Were the students even of legal age? And what about their views



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of women, especially the women of color paid to perform? I will remind him that, according to the reports, these women were treated badly; they were abused verbally. Do we condone the way these women were treated? On the other hand, one woman left and then returned. If she was treated so horrifically, as she claimed, why did she return? As a society, as an educational community, we have failed to teach these young men to respect women and not to abuse alcohol. We have also failed to educate these young women about their own self-worth as individuals.

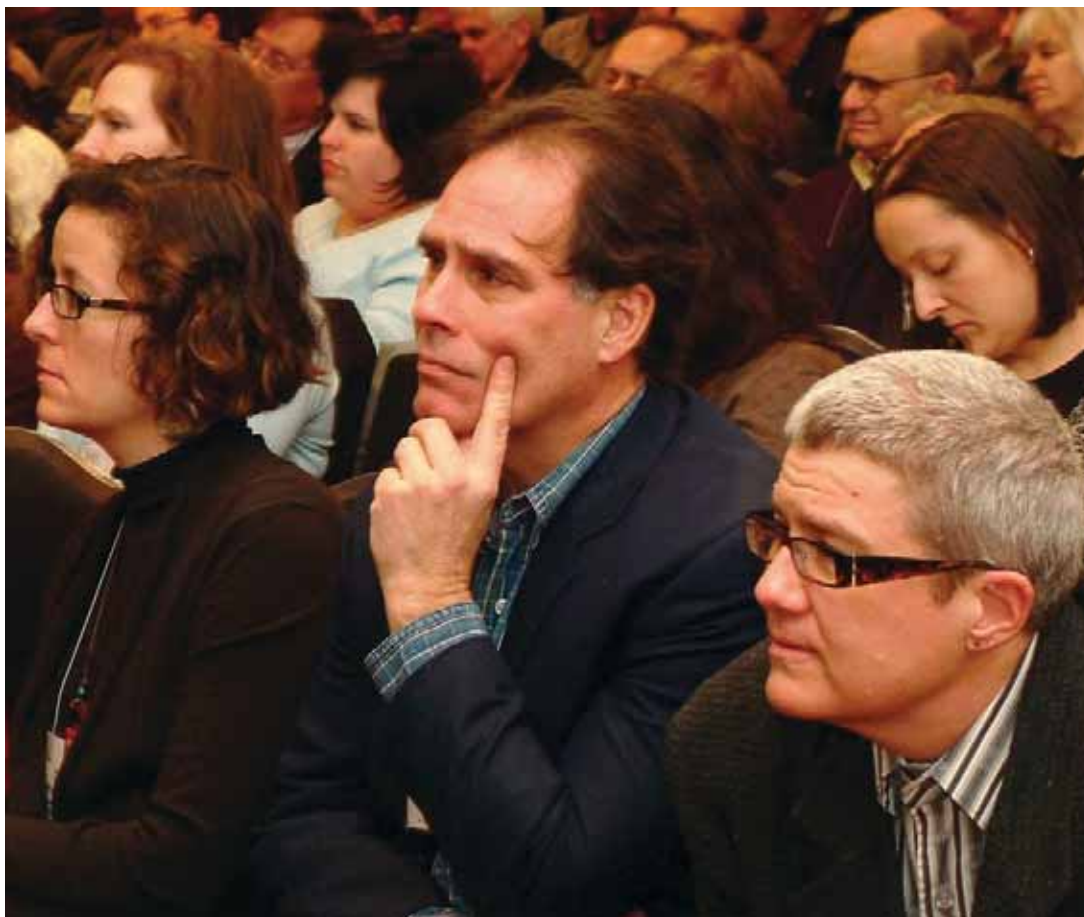
Modeling constructive difficult dialogues can be difficult, but it is necessary. We must learn to listen, observe, and be willing to admit when we are wrong. Those of us who spoke about diversity and inclusion in the early years were wrong in not wanting to include whites in our quest for equality. In South Africa, I saw the errors of our ways. The majority in South Africa, those who had been segregated and oppressed, are now in power.

What a forgiving people! They vividly remembered the pain and inhumane treatment, yet they speak in their constitution of the need for everyone to be involved in building a

just and democratic society.

As leaders, we must model and encourage debates and difficult dialogues. We must engage in civil conversations. We must admit when we are wrong, learn the arguments of those with whom we disagree, and at times, we must agree to disagree and walk away with grace. As leaders, we must insist on educating about and for diversity.

The times have changed, and diversity in this country has become increasingly complex. Diversity is no longer black and white. It is not only about the traditional census groups—black, white, Asian, Hispanic, American Indian. Diversity is multifaceted and intersecting, and there are complexities within groups as well. An increasing number of individuals now classify themselves as multiracial.



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As educators, we have failed to teach about unity within diversity. The demographic shift in this country is occurring without discussion of the consequences or, even worse, with people in leadership positions ignoring it. At many colleges and universities, as in many communities, we passively react to the demographic changes. How often have we heard leaders say that today's students are different, or that they wish they were recruiting more "traditional" students? How many of us who participate in those conversations have actually responded by pointing out that these are the students of today and tomorrow, that these students will populate our cities and our country, and that they are the leaders of tomorrow?

Leadership

If we believe it, we must live it. What do our own teams look like? Do we uphold the principle of equality in our own decision making? We must be leaders of all constituencies. When I arrived at my institution—where no single group is in the majority—many said that I would turn the college into a black and Latino college. When I arrived, my cabinet members were all white. Today, the cabinet consists of two white females, one white male, one gay white male, one Latina, and one African American male. There is also professional and age diversity. It took a while to get there, and I have scars. But the conversations at the cabinet level have become more enriched, and the solutions proposed are more complete.

The responsibility associated with being a college president is daunting and awesome. Alumni, elected officials, faculty, boards of trustees, and members of the surrounding communities all look to us to take particular stands. At the end of the day, however, we must look into the mirror and be true to our own values and principles. Presidential leadership involves speaking up about injustices. The bully pulpit enables presidents to educate, advocate, and influence. Of course, we have to choose our battles carefully. But we must never compromise our commitment to social justice and equality in order to protect our salaries and our positions. These jobs do not last forever, and we might as well leave our mark by trying to make our campuses and our communities better places for everyone.

Coupled with utilizing the bully pulpit is the need to take controversial stands. A personal example will illustrate the point. When I was dean of

students at Hostos Community College in the 1980s, the students there wanted to invite leaders of the Puerto Rican independence movement—including Lolita Lebron, who had recently been pardoned by President Carter after serving twenty-five years in prison for her role in a 1954 attack on the U.S. House of Representatives—to speak on campus. You can imagine the controversy that ensued. The chancellor, many faculty members, and local elected officials opposed the invitation.

When the president of the college announced her decision to withdraw the invitation, the cabinet was appalled. With two Latinos, one African American female, and a Jewish male, ours was the most diverse cabinet at the City University of New York at that time. The four of us—the deans of the college, faculty, students, and administration—met with the president and told her that withdrawing the invitation would violate the principles of open dialogue and debate. We offered to take responsibility and to use the event as a teachable moment. We also decided that if the invitation were withdrawn, we would resign as a group. Were we scared? You bet! But I look back at that episode as one of my proudest moments. In the end, the president changed her mind, the event took place, and both sides were able to engage in constructive debate.

Ours is an elitist profession. Research-intensive institutions are held up as the model, and unfortunately, many look down at the next sector. Research institutions look down on master's institutions, which look down on baccalaureate-granting institutions, which look down on community colleges, which look down on for-profits and K–12 schools. Many who sit on search committees dismiss candidates who come from sectors they look down on.

Today, over 50 percent of Latinos attend community colleges, as do large percentages of women, Native Americans, and African Americans (excepting Historically Black Colleges and Universities). Yet I have seen search committees discount applicants who began their studies at community colleges or who worked at community colleges. How ironic it is that opportunities are limited in this way for

Berkeley College



applicants from the one institution that has opened its doors the widest to students of color. The distinction made between PhDs and EdDs is similarly ironic. Ruth Simmons, president of Brown University, stated it best when she observed that the institution whose existence is all about education looks down on the education degree. As search committee members, we should consider competencies, accomplishments, and evidence of success rather than simply the plumage of the degree. We must not emphasize where the credentials were received over what the individual can contribute. We must reject academic elitism.

Staying grounded

Finally, it is not easy to engage in the struggle for democracy, diversity, equality, and social justice. This collective struggle is not a race to the finish; rather, it is a journey. We must not forget to take care of ourselves. We must feed the mind, nourish the body, and connect with the spirit.

I try to exercise three times per week. I pray every morning. I take vacations and make it a point to do something fun in New York City once per month. I stay connected with

professional friends, and I am extremely close to my family. My sisters and brothers keep me grounded. With my family, I am simply “Millie”—born to humble and proud parents, nothing more and nothing less. To my mother and father, and to my entire family, I dedicate my life’s work; it is because of them that I am who I am.

If we let them, our leadership positions will consume our lives. One of the saddest comments I have heard came from a presidential colleague who told me that she admired how I try to keep connected with friends. She told me that, because of her position, she never made true friends. For her, it was the position and family and nothing else. At the end of the day, if we run ourselves into the ground, we will not be here to continue in the struggle.

The United States is an imperfect country, but it is our country. And it is up to us to strive to make it better, to make it a place where all can sing out loud, for everyone to hear, what Langston Hughes states so eloquently: “I too am American.” □

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